

The Problem of Merit Transference and the *Kyōgyōshinshō*

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IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING that merit transference forms the basis of the *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証 by Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262), in particular the idea of two types of merit transference. And although various attempts have been made to interpret what exactly Shinran is referring to with these two concepts—especially the returning aspect of merit transference—it is still not entirely clear if any of these accurately portrays Shinran’s actual intent. As Terakawa Shunshō has stated: “While it may appear at first glance that Shinran’s concept of the two types of merit transference has already been thoroughly elucidated, I increasingly feel that research on this topic is insufficient and that proper research into this issue has yet to be done. . . . I eagerly await future research and discussions that deal with these issues seriously and straightforwardly from a broad perspective.”¹ I believe that the possibilities and challenges for further research into the *Kyōgyōshinshō* lie herein.

In addressing this question, there are two possible research methods that may be adopted. One is to attempt to arrive at conclusions based on philological analysis of Shinran’s works. The other is to attempt to approach the essence of Shinran’s understanding by examining the various positions regarding the two types of merit transference that have already been proposed by scholars and trying to get at the root of what they signify. Because my research focuses on how one should understand merit transference from the standpoint of philosophy and religious studies, I have necessarily adopted the latter approach. If one were to call the viewpoint of philological analysis—which focuses in closely on its subject matter—microscopic, then

¹ Terakawa 1993, p. 14.

my viewpoint—which examines its subject from a distance—may be called macroscopic and therefore may be unable to avoid making sweeping generalizations. But this viewpoint is not without certain advantages. By observing the object before us at a distance, we are able to get a clearer view of its outline and total form than would be possible if viewed up close.

Needless to say, the fundamental reason that there are so many differing views on Shinran's two types of merit transference, and particularly on the returning aspect of it, is that this concept itself is a difficult one to grasp. Merit transference refers to the infinite Tathāgata changing its form to appear in the world of finite sentient beings in order to liberate those suffering beings and bring them to the infinite. In other words, merit transference is the outward expression of the infinite. However, that the infinite Tathāgata could appear and function within the finite world seems fundamentally impossible and therefore incomprehensible. This is the reason that the functioning of merit transference has been divided into a going aspect and a returning one, as well as the reason why various interpretations of these two types of merit transference have arisen.

However, one must admit that the more immediate reason that such a variety of views concerning Shinran's understanding of the two types of merit transference exists lies in his works themselves. First, there is the imbalance in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* in the treatment of these two concepts, since the returning aspect is discussed only in a very small percentage of the work as a whole. Furthermore, there are two separate groups of stanzas within Shinran's poetry that apparently show two different interpretations of the two types of merit transference, and it is unclear which of these interpretations represents his own understanding. This inconsistency, more than anything else, is the source of the difficulty in understanding Shinran's position. The discussion surrounding his understanding of the two types of merit transference has focused on deciding which of these two alternatives accurately expresses his ideas regarding this issue. However, because Shinran himself presents these two together, it is not appropriate for us to consider just one of these interpretations as representative of his understanding of merit transference while ignoring the other altogether. Indeed, both positions need to be understood as a unified whole. How, then, can his interpretation of the two types of merit transference be understood when his two different positions are considered together? Also, what becomes the central problem when we look at the matter in this way? It is these issues that I will focus on in this paper as I attempt to approach Shinran's understanding of the two types of merit transference.

As for the methodology followed in this study, I will address three understandings—the two differing views found in Shinran’s poems in addition to one that synthesizes them both—in terms of their typology and clarify the fundamental point that they are each trying to express. Then, to elaborate, I will explore the problems that arise in our considerations by looking at analogous issues that were the subject of discussion in Protestant theology in the twentieth century. I will adopt this approach because I believe that the problem of Shinran’s two types of merit transference has a depth and breadth which should be discussed in a way that transcends these limited categories. By considering the question from a different perspective, the fundamental issue at stake will become more evident than when seen only from the position of the two types of merit transference.

What, then, are the three ways of understanding the two types of merit transference?

The first understanding interprets the two types of merit transference as “entering into the returning aspect from the going aspect.” This interpretation can be seen within some of Shinran’s poems: “In the vast, unimaginable gratuity of the merit transference of *Namu Amida Butsu* 南無阿弥陀仏, as one of the benefits of the going aspect of merit transference, the returning aspect is entered,”² and also, “From the great love of the going aspect of merit transference, the great compassion of the returning aspect is attained. What would the bodhisattvas of the Pure Land do without the merit transference of the Tathāgata?”³ In this interpretation, the going aspect is understood to be the aspect of sentient beings who, having attained faith, are born in the Pure Land and reach the point where they will eventually realize nirvana, while the returning aspect is understood as that of sentient beings who, having realized nirvana, return to this world to benefit others. This first understanding, although plagued with a variety of distortions and misinterpretations, has become the traditional understanding of the two types of merit transference.

Here, the interpretation of the two types of merit transference as “having been born in the Pure Land and then returning to this defiled world” follows the expression of Tanluan 曇鸞 (476–542?); but Shinran, by reassigning grammatical markers used to read Tanluan’s passage, shows that the agent that transfers merit is not a sentient being, but the Tathāgata. Therefore, the phrase “going to that land and returning to the defiled world” ceases to

² Shinran Shōnin Zenshū Kankōkai 1969, vol. 2, p. 183. Also, T 83: 666b22–24.

³ Shinran Shōnin Zenshū Kankōkai 1969, vol. 2, p. 184. Also, T 83: 666b25–27.

have a literal meaning and takes on a symbolic one wherein sentient beings, through faith, are taken up and carried by the working of the Tathāgata that goes back and forth between this defiled land and the Pure Land. However, because this first understanding remains burdened with several distortions that arise from not correctly grasping the meaning of Shinran's reinterpretation of Tanluan's position, it has become difficult to ascertain just what its fundamental significance is.

The essence of what this first understanding signifies lies in its attention to the immanent aspect of the working of the Tathāgata, that is, that the power of the Tathāgata's original vow permeates the very life of sentient beings and works through faith—that the infinite works having become the finite.

This first understanding was expressed straightforwardly by Suzuki Daisetsu 鈴木大拙 (1870–1966), who stated: “The Pure Land is a place where it is useless to stay. Those who have gone to the Pure Land must bring the Pure Land right back to this world and do the work of benefiting sentient beings.”⁴ Since sentient beings are taken up by the working of the Tathāgata within faith, the returning aspect of merit transference must also occur within that faith at the same time as the going aspect. Just as it is promised in the original vow that when sentient beings attain faith and live in the stage of the perfectly settled, they will definitely realize nirvana, that vow also promises that, together with the deepening of faith, the working of the Tathāgata acts through the bodies of those sentient beings in the form of the virtues of Samantabhadra. Therefore, the benefit described in the phrase “as one of the benefits of the going aspect of merit transference, the returning aspect is entered” necessarily begins working within the present faith, although its completion is left to the future. What makes up the heart of this first understanding is the insight that the transcendental power of the Tathāgata appears within the basis of the lives of sentient beings and, with the deepening of faith, ultimately works as the motivating force within those beings. I believe that the phrase “die in faith and live in the vow” by Soga Ryōjin 曾我量深 (1875–1971) is an expression of this insight.

In a slightly different way, Tanabe Hajime 田邊元 (1885–1962) interprets “entering into the returning aspect from the going aspect” as the way in which the working of the Tathāgata is transmitted through the interaction of individuals within the historical world. That is, the enlightenment of Śākyamuni (the going aspect) becomes the returning aspect for other peo-

⁴ See Suzuki 1968–71, vol. 6, p. 45.

ple, for example serving as the returning aspect that led the going aspect of Shandao 善導 (613–681), which in turn served as the returning aspect that led the going aspect of Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212), which again became the returning aspect that made Shinran’s going aspect possible. Tanabe holds that the two types of merit transference refer to the way in which, through these alternating shifts between the going and returning aspects, the working of the Tathāgata spreads within the historical world.

Although this interpretation seems to parallel the first type of understanding of the two types of merit transference in that it posits a shift from Śākyamuni’s going aspect to his returning one—because it holds that his returning aspect becomes the foundation for Shinran’s (and our) attainment of the faith of the going aspect of merit transference—it also resembles the second understanding. Thus, it is in an intermediate position between the two.

The second way of understanding the two types of merit transference holds that they are both the working of the Tathāgata which causes sentient beings to “attain the faith of the going aspect of merit transference.” This interpretation is expressed in Shinran’s poem, “When the merit transference of Amida is fulfilled, there are two, the going aspect and the returning aspect. Through these merit transferees alone is the faith made to be attained,”⁵ as well as his statement in the *Sangyō ōjō monrui* 三經往生文類 (Collection of Passages on the Births [Described] in the Three Sutras) that “Because the person who attains true entrusting through the two types of merit transference of the Tathāgata assuredly attains the stage of the rightly settled, it is called Other Power.”⁶

Here, the concrete expression of the going aspect is interpreted to be the inviting call of Amida Tathāgata, while the returning aspect is seen in the teachings and exhortations of our teachers, that is, in Śākyamuni, Hōnen, or Shinran, as well as in the Pure Land patriarchs and the various other guides and teachers who surround one. To use more technical doctrinal language, the returning aspect is seen in one’s debt of gratitude to all the myriad buddhas and bodhisattvas, which take the specific form of one’s teachers. In this case, the two types together are the source or foundation that bring about the development of sentient beings’ “faith.”

Further, since the two types of merit transference are interpreted as the foundation for the attainment of faith, they are understood in relation to

⁵ Shinran Shōnin Zenshū Kankōkai 1969, vol. 2, p. 93. Also, T 83: 661b16–18.

⁶ Shinran Shōnin Zenshū Kankōkai 1969, vol. 3, p. 28. Also, T 83: 675c29–676a2.

Shandao's parable of the two rivers and the white path, which discusses the process of the attainment of faith. That is, the going aspect of merit transference is understood as Amida, the savior who beckons from the western bank, while the returning aspect is understood as Śākyamuni, the teacher who encourages one from the eastern bank. In this way, the two types of merit transference are held to be the complete expression, the root and branch, of the teachings of the two honorable ones.

This second understanding, which can also be seen as a traditional one, is unique in that it takes the working of the Tathāgata to be the foundation of faith, and sees that working to exist outside of faith, in the name of the teaching. In this view, it is the transcendent aspect of the working of the Tathāgata which is emphasized. Specifically, the returning aspect is interpreted as "teaching." Refusing to accept the first understanding, Terakawa has argued that this second understanding is the correct interpretation of Shinran's view of the two types of merit transference.

Soga, in his middling years, expressed the view that the returning aspect should be interpreted from the standpoint of "teaching" instead of "realization," which can be called a Copernican revolution, in itself. However, Terakawa, inspired by Soga's teaching, interpreted the returning aspect as "teaching," and, in doing so, discovered a balanced way to interpret the two types of merit transference within the arrangement of the *Kyōgyōshinshō* (which lays out teaching, practice, faith, and realization focused around the attainment of the faith of the going aspect of merit transference). Further, Terakawa clearly expressed his stance as interpreting the two types of merit transference within the framework of teaching, practice, faith, and realization instead of interpreting them as aspects of the lives of sentient beings (that is, the aspect of sentient beings going to and returning from the Pure Land).

Terakawa states:

Regarding the two types of merit transference, which Shinran interpreted uniquely and laid out as the framework of Shin Buddhism, they should always be understood in their relation to teaching, practice, faith, and realization as being one with these four. Discussing the two types of merit transference apart from teaching, practice, faith, and realization, or, as I often see, considering the two types of merit transference only in terms of the two types of merit transference, or, even worse, making arguments and claims that discuss only the going aspect and the com-

ing aspect, what can only be called “theories of two aspects”—I cannot help but think that all of these are not the correct understanding of Shinran’s interpretation of the two types of merit transference.⁷

Terakawa’s position, which holds that the two types of merit transference should be seen in “teaching, practice, faith, and realization,” and not in the “aspect of the lives of sentient beings,” is an articulation of the anatomy of the *Kyōgyōshinshō* based on an accurate reading of the text and deserves our careful attention.

However, the reverse side of this position, which sees the two types as having nothing to do with the aspect of the lives of sentient beings, seems to contain a problem that requires further consideration. Focusing on the transcendent aspect of the working of the Tathāgata’s merit transference causes us to not give proper attention to its immanent aspect—that the Tathāgata works by appearing in the most profound, invisible depths of the lives of sentient beings. This is the dividing line between the first and second understanding, which is a problem that revolves around the issue of the immanent nature and transcendent nature of the working of merit transference. This is the fundamental problem of theology and doctrinal studies, of philosophy of religion and religious studies that arises when the relationship between God and human beings or between the Tathāgata and sentient beings is called into question.

Actually, this is the problem that dominated the debate in twentieth-century Protestant theology. Therefore, in order to clarify the points at issue in the problem of the two types of merit transference, I would like to consider the way in which the problem was treated within this debate.

The history of twentieth-century Protestant theology was characterized by active debate started by the shock created by *Der Römerbrief* (The Epistle to the Romans) by Karl Barth (1886–1968) and the various criticisms and rebuttals to it. The focal point of this debate was his assertion of the absolute autonomy of the word of God from things human and natural. Liberal theology in the nineteenth to early twentieth century, based on the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), and others, held that one attained cognizance of God through fundamental human emotions such as awe at the vastness of the universe and a sense of reverence and attempted to prove God’s existence unequivocally in the same manner. However, Barth, arguing that that

⁷ Terakawa 1993, p. 83.

position would “dissolve theology into the humanities,” sharply criticized it as ultimately being of the same cloth as the atheism of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872). Barth argued for the independence of theology from the humanities. Further, he strongly advocated the principle position of the Bible, arguing that the word of God is the word of transcendent revelation to human beings which should not be read through things human or natural, but only based on the words of the Bible itself. In this way, by stressing the transcendent nature of the word of God, Barth was able to save theology from the danger of being dissolved into the humanities, metaphysics, religious studies, as well as into the theories of the socialist movement.⁸ On this point Barth is correct, and his contribution to Protestant theology lies therein.

In this respect, Terakawa’s position, which holds that the working of the Tathāgata’s merit transference must not be understood in terms of the aspect of the life of sentient beings but only in relation to teaching, practice, faith, and realization—which transcend human beings—is essentially similar to Barth’s. Through this position, Terakawa was able to avoid the danger of incorporating the returning aspect of merit transference as the theoretical basis for a social movement that has no relation to religion. There are attempts both within and outside of the Shin community to emphasize the social nature of Shin faith and incorporate Shinran’s thought regarding the returning aspect of merit transference into social activism, and such attempts can only be avoided by arguing that the returning aspect should not be viewed as an “aspect of the lives of sentient beings.”

However, one must not overlook the problems in Barth’s position. By emphasizing the absolute and transcendent nature of the working of God toward human beings and completely excluding any point of contact between the two other than faith alone, this position ultimately makes the life of human beings an empty one without depth and hardens faith itself into dogma. Only when the working of God or the Tathāgata can be felt and maintained within the imperceptible depths of the human mind does human life take on depth and become creative. When one only emphasizes the transcendent nature of God and places the life of sentient beings outside that transcendence, their lives and culture lose their depth and become empty, without meaning. The criticism of Barth’s transcendentalism (supernaturalism) by Paul Tillich (1886–1965) centers around this problem.

⁸ Barth did not deny movements for social reform, but instead advocated them. However, he rejected any attempt to bring the name of God into such movements as confusing that which is human with that which is divine.

Barth's theology is said to be "dialectical theology." However, Tillich states that the problem with this theology is that it is not dialectical. Dialectics refers to the intermingling of negation and affirmation—the transcendental, the infinite, negates itself to be internalized within the finite and the finite negates itself, opening up to the transcendental, the infinite. Tillich argued that the weakness in Barth's thought is that it only emphasizes the aspect in which the infinite transcends the finite. In that sense, he says that it is not dialectical but supernatural.

Applying this argument to the issue of the two types of merit transference, emphasizing the transcendental nature of the working of the Tathāgata's merit transference and keeping it outside the lives of sentient beings takes faith out of the realm of sympathy and places it into that of dogma. The infinite richness of the thought regarding the returning aspect of merit transference lies within experiencing the transcendent functioning of the Tathāgata as it works within faith, being reflected in the profundity of human life. When the returning aspect is limited to the debt of gratitude toward one's teachers and kept outside of oneself, there is a danger that faith will become self-contained and dogmatically circumscribed. The working of the Tathāgata that is transcendent outside the self must also be understood as something that transcends the self within. In order to transcend this difficulty with the second understanding, which limits the returning aspect to "teaching," it is thus necessary to discover a third interpretation.

The third understanding is to consider the two types of merit transference not only in the establishment of faith, but also as intermingled consciousness of call and response between sentient beings and the Tathāgata in its working through emergence within the depths of the lives of sentient beings. Here the returning aspect of merit transference is not only seen as "teaching" which serves as the foundation of faith, but also as "realization" which appears within the depths of the lives of sentient beings along with the deepening of faith. The returning aspect is seen then in the reflection of the advent of the working of the Tathāgata in the historical world and its working within that world.

It was Soga who argued for this understanding. In the middle period of his life, Soga developed the unheard of idea that the returning aspect of merit transference should be seen in the teachings of one's predecessors, and that it should be understood from the perspective of "teaching" instead of "realization." As I stated above, Terakawa was inspired by this idea of Soga's and argued for the second understanding of the two types of merit transference which is similar to Barth's position. However, Soga later rejected this

sort of understanding and moved on to a third understanding which includes the first understanding discussed above within the second understanding, arguing that Shinran likely developed new ideas regarding the two types of merit transference during the last years of his life. That is, he came to understand the two types of merit transference not just from the perspective of the attainment of the entrusting mind, but also as a worldview that opens up within oneself together with the deepening of that entrusting. This is what Soga expressed in the words “die in faith and live in the vow.” The appearance of the working of the Tathāgata within the depths of the world of sentient beings comes to be understood in terms of “the intermingling consciousness of call and response between the Tathāgata and sentient beings” (*kannō dōkō* 感応道交). In this way, the returning aspect of merit transference comes to be seen in the working of the Tathāgata as it is reflected in the historical world through the activities of sentient beings. What is quite interesting is that while Terakawa’s position is very similar to Barth’s, this position of Soga’s includes elements of Tillich’s criticism of Barth.

On this point, Soga stated that if the going aspect of merit transference is the ultimate truth, then the returning aspect is the secular truth, and that one can consider culture in general to be the returning aspect. The returning aspect may be seen where the formless Tathāgata is reflected in the human world, whatever form it may take. Further, by taking that in as a source of sustenance, human beings are able to live in this actual world. Their world comes to be seen not as dissociated from the Tathāgata, but as being laid over the world of the Tathāgata. The second understanding of the returning aspect of merit transference, which interprets it in terms of the “parable of the two rivers and the white path,” is not utterly dissolved, but the “ornaments of the Pure Land” come to the fore and this understanding is taken up within it. I believe that this is the reason that Shinran speaks of the “returning aspect of merit transference” as the “ornaments of the Pure Land” in the chapter on realization in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*.

In this way, regarding the integration of the first understanding with the second one, the fundamental problem of the two types of merit transference comes to light. That problem was also posed in Protestant theology in the twentieth century and is full of potential for future consideration. I believe that the challenges and potential for research into the *Kyōgyōshinshō* lie in conducting research into the text from a broad perspective and giving careful attention to the depth and breadth of the issues involved in this problem.

(Translated by Michael Conway)

ABBREVIATION

- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. 100 vols. Ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡辺海旭. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai. 1924–34.

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